

The changing role of the TAFE teacher

by Linda Simon, Federal TAFE President

State and Territory governments across the country have been looking at the issue of the changing role of the TAFE teacher and how teachers can be supported to take on new roles. At times this is being addressed in a structural way, and at others through changing or expanding classifications and work. So it is timely to ask whether the role of the TAFE teacher has really changed.

One of the expectations of TAFE teachers has been that they bring current and relevant industry expertise to their teaching. What is not so clear in most TAFE Institutes across the country is the question of just how teachers stay 'up-to-date and relevant'. As part of their role, many TAFE teachers have always expected that they would be teaching and assessing in locations other than an institutional classroom. That being said, what appears to have changed is the actual amount of teaching and assessing being undertaken in workplaces; changes which appear to go hand-in-hand with moves to personalised learning and to expanding a teacher's role into that of a workforce developer.

Research undertaken in NSW in 2001 identified that there should be investment "not in skills alone, but in bundles of innovative practices that help develop, utilise, and retain a skilled workforce, rewarding jobs and helping businesses compete." (NSW Board of VET, 2001) Similarly, the 2006 IPART report 'Upskilling NSW' states that: "... in the United Kingdom, South Australia and Queensland, governments have begun to integrate skills policies with mutually reinforcing policies and strategies on business investment, the adoption of new technology, changes to product markets, work organisation, job design, wage structures, and firms' capacity to integrate on-the-job training. This approach is known as 'workforce development'."

One example of such an approach is the Commonwealth Government's partnering with states and territories in a 'skill ecosystems' approach to training and workforce development in a group of businesses or across an industry area, such as the racing industry.

The IPART report goes on to say that all VET providers will be required:

to work more closely with industry, especially with small and medium sized firms, to complement new work practices or organisational and technological innovations. Teaching alone will not be sufficient. VET providers must seek to develop partnerships with firms (or clusters of firms) that enable them to encourage these firms to provide higher skilled jobs, clearer career paths and more training.

In NSW, a working party has been set up with TAFE management and the NSW Teachers Federation. It

has been very much driven from a union perspective that if the role of TAFE teachers has changed and is continuing to do so, then consideration must be given to how to develop, recognise, promote and support the capability of teachers to engage with industry and be involved in innovation. The working party has considered the environment that TAFE teachers now work in and identified all the 'drivers' of change that appear to be impacting upon our work.

In 2005, Victor Callan undertook similar work for TAFE Queensland, 'Building Staff Capability-TAFE Queensland', which recommended a staff capability framework including expertise in teaching and learning, flexible delivery and assessment, learner support, industry currency and budgeting and planning.

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In Western Australia, research was commissioned in 2006, and a report 'VET Teaching and Learning: The Future Now 2006-2010: The roles, knowledge and skill requirements of the VET practitioner' was produced. The report states that *while the sector must be able to draw on the skills and knowledge of its VET professionals in a range of critical areas, not all VET practitioners will need the same knowledge and skills sets. The report is clear that "there should be no attempt to develop 'superheroes'. The skills sets needed by any individual will depend on the context, and should be determined taking the needs of the provider and its client base into account.*

On the other hand, John Mitchell's 2005 article *The new VET practitioner* identified the required features as:

- viewing individual students as lifelong learners on career pathways;
- respecting the business risks and pressures of enterprise clients;
- appreciating that enterprises need skills to achieve business outcomes;
- understanding links between training and workforce development.;
- functioning effectively within supply chains and skill ecosystems;
- developing and sustaining long-term relationships with clients;
- participating within a team to access colleagues' specialist skills;

- tapping into wider networks for information and resources;
- understanding the value of accessing and applying industry research;
- contributing to the development of innovative products and services;
- improving the tools and frameworks of professional practice; and
- updating technical skills and industry-specific knowledge.

There are also a number of NCVET reports that identify what could be considered to be the new skills that teachers need, including the current consortium work around supporting vocational education and training providers in building capability for the future. One of the key messages coming through this research is that strategies to build provider capability must focus on the needs of both the individual and the organisation. This requires that all staff must be provided with opportunities and environments to promote ongoing learning and development, and the reports cite some workplaces with environments that support learning for the new skills. The research also notes, however, that there are particular groups of staff, such as sessional teaching staff and casual staff, who often miss out on these learning and development opportunities.

The Kell TAFE Futures Inquiry also considered the issue as part of a future TAFE. Peter Kell identified that career options should be developed "to take into account the emerging specialist functions that characterise the diverse work of TAFE teaching".

If on the basis of this large amount of literature, we accept that the role of the TAFE teacher has changed, we still come back to the question of how we recognise and support teachers in these various roles. What TAFE is very short-on across the country is professional development, funding and resources that do just that. Both the Kell and IPART reports refer to sabbaticals for TAFE teachers, or opportunities to take on other jobs. The IPART report also recommends that funding be separately identified for TAFE Institutes "to enhance TAFE staff skills and develop a system-wide culture characterised by entrepreneurship and innovation."

The AEU's TAFE Claim calls on governments to invest in TAFE teachers through a Quality Improvement Fund that includes professional development. The funding commitment required would be \$120 million in additional funds in 2008, working up to \$555 million in 2011. Surely an investment in the changing role of TAFE teachers is worth at least that! ❖